

## From theatre to time capsule: art at Jan Fabre's Troubleyn/Laboratory

Nadia Sels

Some places have what you call a *genius loci* – the spirit of the place: an indefinable, unique atmosphere associated with the exceptional history of the location. The building at 23 Pastorijsstraat in Antwerp is one of these remarkable places. The great Flemish actor Julien Schoenaerts used to have his Ringtheater here, until it burnt down in mysterious circumstances in 1974. Jan Fabre is now breathing new life into the building. He has set up his Troubleyn/Laboratory there, a workspace and rehearsal room where he also wants to offer young performing artists a haven for research and experimentation. The building was converted in a way that does justice to its rich history. Its rough finish leaves the traces of the past easy to see – an appropriate choice for a place intended for creative processes. But another decision was even more fundamental. Fabre invited forty-odd nationally and internationally renowned artists – friends and respected colleagues – to each install a work of art of their own in the building. The result is impressive. Anyone who now wanders through this labyrinthine building will come across a new surprise around every corner. For example, one of the corridors is inhabited by ghostly figures created by Enrique Marty. Elsewhere, the visitor suddenly faces the penetrating stare emanating from a gigantic portrait of a chicken – an installation by Koen Van Mechelen that refers to the Mona Lisa. In some cases the works are concealed; under the inaccessible roof-ridge of the theatre, for example, is a sculpture by Henk Visch, an aluminium hare that surveys the theatre from the darkness.

It is Fabre's love of the building that inspired him to launch this project for the integration of art. Since he has only received the building on lease for 33 years, he wanted to give it an undeniable added value so that it would be preserved after that period has elapsed. Which led to the idea of enriching the building with works of art that are anchored into it. In this way the roles are reversed: while it is normally the works of art that are conserved by housing them in a building intended for them, in this case it is the building that is conserved by the works of art housed in it. The unique place this creates is also intended to be a sort of time capsule: to future generations, the Troubleyn/Laboratory will be a cross-section of the art of this era. This desire to build a dam to stop time was to be found in Fabre's oeuvre from the very beginning. One only has to think of his early work with 'weck jars', the glass jars that some decades ago were used for conserving food. So one might think of the Troubleyn/Laboratory as Fabre's largest 'weck jar' so far: through these works of art, the memory of Fabre's life and work is made less transient.

But the theme of metamorphosis is even more important than the conservation aspect. The integration of these works of art has turned 23 Pastorijsstraat into a different building. Whereas the average museum actually completely uproots its works from any context they may have had by displaying them in 'white cube' spaces, these works were created organically on the

basis of the space itself. Marina Abramovic, for example, opted for the kitchen, a room she sees as the spiritual heart of the house. She wrote a poetic recipe on the walls in pig's blood – a homage to her past work with Fabre, in which blood also played an important part. This work, which is entitled *Spirit Cooking*, was inspired by the popular belief that ghosts still feed, no longer on tangible foodstuffs, but on light, sound, emotions and so on. So the work is about the conversion of material into spiritual energy. In Abramovic's case, it was the location that gave rise to the work of art. But vice versa, the work of art often transforms the location. In the contribution by Berlinde De Bruyckere, for instance, which stands like a mystery, hidden in the archive stairwell. Against the backdrop of the bare, weathered wall, a small wax sculpture is displayed under a glass bell, seemingly composed of flayed flesh. The rawness of the work is in harmony with the rawness of the red brick, but it contrasts with the qualities of the glass bell, which seems intended to tenderly protect the skinned flesh. It is a reflection on pain, longing and human vulnerability, which makes the previously nondescript stairwell an almost sacral space.

The works not only enter into dialogue with their setting, but are also in communication with each other. The artists invited often chose to respond to Jan Fabre's characteristic visual idiom. In his ceiling painting, Luc Tuymans, for example, takes up the theme of blood, and the contribution by Wim Delvoye – a bronze self-portrait that serves as a door-knocker – is a reference to Fabre's bronzes. In his turn, Peter De Cupere, the artist of smells, reacted to Fabre's fascination with bodily fluids by impregnating a wall with the sweat of several of Troubleyn's dancers. Hans Van Houwelingen's work, *Vera Azula*, is exceptionally subtle. He created an ode to Fabre's use of the Bic ballpoint by filling several holes in the wall of the courtyard – scars left over from demolition work – with pieces of lapis lazuli. This azure blue stone, which was used to make the extremely expensive pigment ultramarine in the Renaissance, symbolises the sublime, the highest achievements of art.

It is not surprising that this creative communication often takes the form of a reflection on artishood. *Sweet Bullets*, a small and delicate mural by Robert Devriendt, portrays Fabre himself being held at gunpoint by a half-naked beauty with a fur coat and a Kalashnikov. Anyone with an eye for detail will figure out why Fabre is looking almost welcomingly at this *Venus in Furs*: the weapon is missing its magazine. The bullets being shot here are of the symbolic kind, depicting inspiration. The woman represents beauty that overwhelms, holds one captive, touches one's heart. The theatre-maker Romeo Castellucci created a panel whose form is reminiscent of the stone tablets. But the ten commandments have been replaced by a name: Onan, the Old Testament character who refused to father a child on his brother's widow and instead ejaculated his seed on the ground. But putting Onan forward as a paradigm, Castellucci links artishood to waste, rebellion, impurity and solitude. By contrast, the work by Johan van Geluwe installed at the front of the building expresses a belief in art as communication; it is a copper letterbox with the logo of his virtual institution, *M.O.M., the Museum of Museums*. A slogan on this letterbox runs 'only art can break your heart/only kitsch can make you rich'. Van Geluwe has devoted his oeuvre to ironically probing the

boundary between art, kitsch and commerce. Through his concept of the *M.O.M.*, he questioned the way art in museums is literally and figuratively put on a pedestal, and is thereby isolated from the public and from everyday life. Fabre's Troubleyn/Laboratory shows that things can be different, and Van Geluwe's logo is therefore in the right place at the entrance.

The strength of this art project indeed lies in the fact that it is embedded in a genuine narrative: the ties between an artist and the place he works in, and his ties with other people. The cliché that beauty binds people together is here couched in very concrete terms. These ties sometimes even cross the boundary of death. Possibly the most moving room in the Troubleyn/Laboratory is the Edmond Fabre archive, where Jan's father's jazz records are kept. The door of the room, which is covered on both sides by a fleece of small round bells, is the work of Bruna Esposito. Entry to the room is thus accompanied by a gentle tinkling reminiscent of crickets, the insect whose song heralds the transition from night to day. In this way, the work, whose title is *Who's ringing at the door?*, makes reference to *the hour blue*, the half-light zone which is so important to Fabre too. In this case, the door is also a symbol of the transition between two worlds: life and death, reality and imagination. According to Esposito, art and music also belong in this twilight zone. The Edmond Fabre archive also houses a work in stained glass by Berend Strik. Between the luminous areas in red and yellow we see a portrait of Jimi Hendrix, with the words, in electric-blue: 'When I die, just keep playing the records', a quote from the legendary guitarist himself. In this context he is shown as a sort of modern saint, one who reminds the artist to give everything he's got. This glass piece is called *Sky Church*, a concept Jimi Hendrix used to express the fact that in his performances he not only wanted to play music, but also to bring people together around an exceptional experience. Strik sees this as a task for the Troubleyn/Laboratory too.

One more work, which perfectly summarises the spirit of this art integration project, is the stone inscription the Italian artist Alberto Garutti cemented into the courtyard. The exact point where the work was installed was determined by chance: an impartial hand threw up a rubber ball and the stone was placed where it came to rest. The inscription itself refers to the guiding role played by chance: 'every step I have taken in my whole life has led me here, now'. These words, which will be true for everyone who reads them, expresses a love for fate, an *amor fati*. With hindsight, the random twists of life assume a meaning when they lead to one sublime instant, a single miraculous encounter with a moment, an object or a person. Just like Garutti's stone, the art integrated into the Troubleyn/Laboratory is a monument to a process, a series of encounters which together make up a history.

The provisional list of artists taking part: